



COLORADO

BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

SALLIE CLARK

COMMISSIONER DISTRICT 3

April 26, 2013

Congressional Western Caucus (CWC)

U.S. Rep. Steve Pearce, Co-Chairman and U.S. Rep. Cynthia Lummis, Co-Chairman

Washington, D.C. 20515

Attn: Pete Obermueller, CWC Executive Director

RE: Field Hearing, Seeking Colorado's Solutions: Forest Health, Wildfires, and Habitat Protection

Thank you for the opportunity to comment at the field hearing on May 2, 2013 regarding forest and flood mitigation efforts, wildfire concerns and healthy forest management. This discussion in Colorado is a matter of critical public safety efforts. The lives of our citizens are at risk when dead and diseased trees turn the mountainside into a tinder box, ready to explode into a firestorm with the next bolt of lightning. And, the long-term watershed and flood risk impacts of these fires can be more devastating than the fire event itself.

On June 23, 2012, the most Waldo Canyon Fire, began in El Paso County, Colorado, very near to our well-known mountain Pikes Peak, in the Pike National Forest. While this fire primarily impacted the commissioner district which I represent in western El Paso County, it also took its toll and had a profound economic and emotional impact on our entire community. Fuelled by dead trees on National Forest lands, the fire quickly spread over 18,000 acres. It was the most destructive fire in Colorado history. More than 300 homes were lost and two El Paso County citizens lost their lives.

Wildfire risks can and must be mitigated. Thousands of acres of dead or dying trees adjacent to urban neighborhoods are a recipe for the kind of disaster we experienced with the Waldo Canyon fire. Now, as our community only begins to recover in the aftermath of the fire, the burned and scarred mountainside provides little comfort or mitigation to the ensuing flooding we are seeing today. This is currently threatening, not only homes, roads, infrastructure and water supply and delivery systems, but the lives of both adults and children, with at least one elementary school in the direct line of flooding destruction for which our county and school district must protect through local taxpayer dollars. There were many lessons learned from this disaster, but one of the most painful is that the public lands which are not controlled by local agencies, contribute so much to our quality of life also pose a substantial threat to public safety.

Working collaboratively with state and local officials, the federal government can identify and mitigate the dangers posed by unhealthy forest lands throughout Colorado. It is our belief that with the right tools and input from local interests, Forest Service managers, contributing factors to deadly wildfires which include Beetle infestation, drought, and poor forest health can be properly addressed. By flagging these threats and outlining prescribed remedies and streamlined efforts, this will prevent avoidable fires and create defensible boundaries between future wildfires and urban neighborhoods.

200 S. CASCADE AVENUE, #100
OFFICE: 719-520-6413



COLORADO SPRINGS, CO 80908-2208
FAX: 719-520-6397

The climate of the Western United States will continue to see cycles of ample precipitation and drought. Insects and disease will continue to take a toll on our forests but we have a responsibility to manage these issues and mitigate the risks. The Waldo Canyon Fire was a stark reminder of the need to be proactive in our efforts to protect our citizens, property, and resources. We understand that no single effort is perfect and we cannot end the threat of destructive wildfires. But it is important that we recognize and establish a framework for state, local and federal government agencies and the private sector, to work together to identify and manage our forests in a responsible way and to implement policies that provide the ability to get the job done. Appropriate forest mitigation recognizes the need to preserve our natural resources while protecting the health, welfare and safety of our citizens.

During the months following the Waldo Canyon and High Park Fires, El Paso and Larimer counties established a close working relationship to advocate at the national level for Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) through the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). The Continuing Resolution (CR) was eventually successful in including approximately \$17 million for Colorado recovery and mitigation efforts. Although these dollars are being provided to help with subsequent post fire flooding, much more is needed to assist our communities in preventing future damage and floods. At the National Association of Counties (NACo) recent legislative conference in Washington, D.C., along with my Colorado Counties, Inc. (CCI) colleagues, I successfully advocated for a NACo resolution seeking changes in Stafford Act limitations related to post fire flood coverage. This is a priority for Colorado and our national counties association.

The El Paso County Board of Commissioners officially endorsed the Healthy Forest Management and Wildfire Prevention Act as an effective tool to assist the U.S. Forest Service in the management of wildland interface lands. On behalf of the Board of Commissioners of El Paso County, Colorado, and as a Board Member of National Association of Counties, I urge the CWC to encourage proactive measures to lessen the likelihood of future deadly and destructive wildfires like Waldo Canyon and to provide changes in legislation that will assist communities in recovery and restoration efforts. We thank you and each of your committee members for your thoughtful consideration and for your ongoing support of legislation and policies that will provide state and local agencies with the proper tools and resources to ensure the protection of our public lands and the safety of our communities. Please feel free to contact me at 719.651.5030 if I can be of further assistance or answer any additional questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Sallie Clark". The ink is dark and the signature is fluid, with a large initial 'S'.

Sallie Clark
El Paso County Commissioner District 3
Board Member, National Association of Counties